

THE TRANSFORMATION OF MATERIALS AND REPRESENTATION
OF THE IDEA OF THE BABY DOLL

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Problem in Lieu of Thesis Prepared for the Degree of
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I want to find a balance within the juxtaposition of representational imagery, patterned fabric, stain and found objects, which effectively communicates the ideas of my work, yet still provides a visually interesting object/painting. How do my materials relate to the content and/or meaning of the work? How will focusing on a single subject affect the development and visual content of my painting? How will I choose representational images to use in relation to the aims of my subject? I was struck by the connections between the baby doll and the real baby. The baby doll became a representation of an idealized body. My interest in baby doll source materials evolved through several different stages, beginning with drawings of baby dolls, then actual doll parts, and finally to imagery of babies with genetic defects. Formally, the work was able to progress as the idea or content progressed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem	
Methodology	
2. DISCUSSION	5
CONCLUSION.....	10

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My work embraces representational imagery because I believe there is no limit to the amount of imagery that can be found to convey an idea. The imagery I choose typically has several different layers of associative meaning. I always hope to catch the viewer's attention with at least one of these layers. The images I find intriguing, and worth incorporating into my art, are usually easily identifiable, yet hold other, perhaps even obscure, significance in art history, politics, or some cultural context. Essentially, they reveal an idea that I want to explore.

In my earlier paintings, I attempted to control the meaning of my art by limiting the imagery to iconic pictures and patterned fabric. Unfortunately, the paintings were very static and my exploration of the subject matter was minimal. The work was almost fully developed mentally before I even began. With these earlier paintings, the content was clear, but lacked vitality. The degree of transformation made to the patterned fabric was also minimal, usually consisting of a thin coat of gesso, which did not obscure the pattern, but provided a traditional art background to begin working on.

Next, I worked with other techniques, using less imagery on the canvas, to create ambiguity in the meaning and to make the inherent relationships less obvious. The use of patterned fabric was also discontinued to avoid unnecessary connections or associations. By working on solid ground, rather than patterned fabric, there seemed to be a layer missing and a lack of narrative interplay within the paintings. In eliminating the use of fabric, I found an essential element in the creation of my work was lost. However, the paring down of imagery did allow for a more fluid interpretation, since connections between imagery could not lead to a simple narrative interpretation.

I reinstated the patterned fabric and am currently experimenting with the notion of text as imagery or images that conceptually reveal words. Instead of focusing attention on forced connections between fabric and iconic imagery, the fabric has become an integral part of the work. Most important, I am exploring my subject matter through the act of creating the work, rather than beginning with a preconceived idea of how everything will fit together. This is a new and exciting development in my process.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

I want to find a balance within the juxtaposition of representational imagery, patterned fabric, stain and found objects, which effectively communicates the ideas of my work, yet still provides a visually interesting object/painting. In addition, I need to understand the effect that a sustained exploration of subject matter will have on the development of my art.

Currently, my topic is the notion of “baby doll” which, I believe, is relatively universal in nature. This topic lends itself to visual exploration both culturally and through the artistic process in that there is unlimited information at hand from which to derive imagery and text. The problem is how to communicate the cultural relevancy and importance of the idea of the baby doll while presenting a visually fresh and interesting body of work.

Within this body of work, I intend to answer the following questions:

1. How do my materials (i.e. stained fabric, baby doll imagery, etc.) relate to the content and/or meaning of the work?
2. How will focusing on a single subject affect the development and visual content of my painting?
3. How will I choose representational images to use in relation to the aims of my subject?

METHODOLOGY

I will create a series of 8-10 paintings, which may incorporate other media. Through these works, I will attempt to answer the prior questions. I will examine the idea of the baby doll using various materials, imagery and wordplay. The subject matter will focus on “baby doll” and the connotations found in our society. I will exhibit my

work in a gallery and write the problem in lieu of thesis paper. I also intend to keep a journal recording my ideas.

CHAPTER 2

DISCUSSION OF WORK

My objectives in producing the following body of work were to focus on a single subject matter and to try to answer significant questions within my work. I feel that these answers were found and, of even more importance, a more concise understanding of my artistic output and creative processes was discovered along the way. I continued using materials already present in my previous body of work, and by focusing on a single subject, the component materials came together in a more cohesive and stronger statement than in earlier work.

Question 1. How do my materials (i.e. stained fabric, baby doll imagery, etc.) relate to the content and/or meaning of the work?

The primary materials that I used in the creation of this body of work, stained fabric and baby doll imagery, was derived from a consumer-based, mass-produced context. I was able to combine these elements, transforming them through physical manipulation, changing them into what, I think, are individualized objects.

For example, in Growth, the baby doll is transformed by the use of stains, the cutting of hair and the physical deformation sprouting out of the torso. These manipulations turn the otherwise physically normal aspects of the baby doll into an abnormal, and individualized, body/object. The fabric, which serves as a background to

the object, is also stained and incorporates patterns of young children playing. This piece also includes three lines going across the fabric horizontally (red, yellow, and blue), which is meant to imply growth marks that children have placed on walls as they get taller over time. The staining on the fabric gathers more strongly around the baby doll figure allowing for a cleaner more formal connection between the object and the fabric.

In the work A Man's Maturity, which has between 30-40 layers of stains, the fabric background begins to become a color field, losing the patterning in the fabric underneath these layers. However, the patterning is not entirely lost, only changed to give an effect of excessive wear or erosion. This idea of an aged look, or a throwaway style of representation is extremely important to the goals that I had in working with this subject.

As I worked with the idea of baby doll as a subject, I was struck by the connections between the baby doll and the real baby. The baby doll became a representation of an idealized body. The changes that I made to these doll bodies attempted to subvert the notion of the ideal baby or body, thus turning them into unique and flawed objects, as real bodies are. In addition, the stained treatment of the fabric ultimately began to evolve from a mass-produced or commercial print to a more individualized and unique palette.

In the series TET, four baby doll parts were literally ripped from the torso of the doll and attached to stained fabric. These parts had a bluish tinge on the tips of the fingers and toes, which mimicked a disease called Tetralogy of Fallot that some children exhibit during episodes of crying or feeding. The patterned fabric that serves as a

backdrop to these objects was commercial baby fabric, used to make blankets or mattresses for baby cribs. This fabric was treated in a similar way as the doll parts by applying brown and yellow stains until they resembled fabric that had been used (or abused) by the baby for a long period of time.

Question 2. How will focusing on a single subject affect the development and visual content of my painting?

The visual content of my painting was directly affected by forcing me to be more specific in the imagery chosen. By doing this I spent more time on exploration of the staining techniques and manipulation of the baby doll imagery. This, in turn, affected the development of the work. As I became more comfortable with the subject matter and materials, I functioned more intuitively with them.

This intuitiveness allowed for several changes in my process from previous work. In earlier work, manipulation of the fabric would include applying gesso to the surface or stains that did not have any clear connection with the subject matter or ideas that I was attempting to convey. Within this body of work I limited my palette to three main colors – yellow, browns, and blacks. All of these colors were chosen for the association with bodily functions that related directly with the idea of the baby. As previously mentioned, the series TET had several layers of stains applied until they looked completely worn. This is also true of Orange Baby and Purple Baby. Both of these pieces had layers of

stains applied that resembled fabric which had come directly from the trash. Again, these techniques reinforced the main idea of turning against an idealized form.

When choosing fabric to work with, I limited myself (with a few exceptions) to those that had obvious connections to baby blankets or mattresses. The most successful of these, I felt was Angel Heads. The fabric I chose for this painting was pink with images of baby bottles, safety pins and the word “baby” in white print. The brown and yellow stains I employed could not offset the pink fabric entirely. It did, however, turn the ground into a more interesting shade of pink that continued my aims in the other pieces. Attached to this fabric were five baby doll heads that were suspended by wire. All of these heads had been dipped in gesso and given a brown and yellow stain treatment. What became interesting with this work is that the stain began collecting around the eyes and mouth giving the heads a ghostlike appearance. In addition, I feel that the scale of the heads in this piece related to the scale of the patterned fabric in a more effective way than other pieces. The smallness of the heads worked well against the smallness of the type printed on the pink fabric. Also, the white type and the white heads, both stained in similar fashion, created a cohesive unity between the foreground (doll heads) and background (fabric).

Question 3. How will I choose representational images to use in relation to the aims of my subject?

My interest in baby doll source materials evolved through several different stages, beginning with drawings of baby dolls, then actual doll parts, and finally to imagery of babies with genetic defects. I began with a large collection of images related to baby dolls. From this initial set I edited those images I found most appealing. These included images that only dealt with baby doll parts, or dismembered baby dolls. As I worked exclusively with these edited images, I found that my interest did not lie in the parts as a body, but in the dismembered parts and their abnormality.

I then began to investigate images incorporating genetic defects in babies. In the painting Cleft, two separate images of babies with cleft palates are shown. My desire was to reveal unique facets of an otherwise mass-produced, idealized object such as the baby doll. An additional element in this piece was a plywood background. While I felt that this material added to the idea of cleft (in terms of a separation or schism), the treatment of the processed wood was minimal and did not necessarily reflect the same ideas as other elements I had used. Because of this, I think that this piece was the least effective.

Fabric images, for the most part, were chosen for topics related to babies. In some works, these mass produced fabric images were effectively covered with multiple layers of stain, as in A Man's Maturity. In other works, the imagery on the fabric was allowed to interplay with the objects more directly, as in Angel Heads. The main decision in choosing which approach to take relied heavily on formal decisions, which I felt made the work stronger visually. This sense of a potent aesthetic quality was something that was lacking in much of my previous work.

CONCLUSION

As stated in the introduction, I feel that I have learned a great deal by focusing on a single subject. It allowed me to not worry as much about content, which was something that seemed to hold back the progression of my previous work. It also allowed me a greater freedom to pursue formal issues that I had not focused on entirely before. The content of the work changed as the work progressed, teaching me something about why I choose the images I paint, or treat the fabric in the manner that I do.

What this information also allowed me to do was go back to previous work and find answers to these same questions, but that were not easily understood or recognized from looking at them individually. What I found was a consistent use of addressing the subject of the abnormal. Previous topics I had chosen to work with were masturbation, mental illness, genetically altered seeds, and the idea of good posture. All of these subjects revolve around a broader topic of the abnormal which this series, or body, of work also ultimately developed into.

Formally, the work was able to progress as the idea or content progressed. Sometimes the work would inform the content of the next piece. At times, the way in which the work evolved became dictated by the ideas behind the work. All of these elements worked together, successfully in some pieces, and less so in others. Ultimately I discovered an inherent fascination of mine with the topic of abnormality, as well as a successful methodology for producing communicative artwork on the subject.